

McConnell to Put Green New Deal to Test Vote in First of Many Showcases

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Highlight: Senate Republicans believe the Green New Deal is a political disaster for Democrats, and they will make them vote on it — possibly many times.

Body

WASHINGTON — Senator Mitch McConnell, the majority leader, will force Democrats on Tuesday to take a stand on the Green New Deal and its ambitious goal of conquering climate change — after a long windup designed to drive a wedge between cautious Democratic senators and the liberal activists pushing for climate action.

The resolution, which pairs quick action to throttle carbon emissions and liberal job-creation programs, will fail at the hands of the Republican majority. Many, if not most, Democrats plan to vote present, arguing that the resolution up for a vote is not anything like a fully formed piece of legislation and has not even received a hearing. Stunt votes in the past by both parties have had little political impact.

But Republicans say putting the Democrats on record is significant, and it is just the beginning: They intend to keep the Green New Deal in the spotlight as long as possible to paint Democrats as socialists, out of touch with American values.

“It’s the gift that keeps on giving,” said Senator James M. Inhofe, an Oklahoma Republican who once brought a snowball to the Senate floor in an effort to disprove climate change.

Over the past several weeks a parade of Republicans have accused supporters of the Green New Deal of plotting to ban cars and cows, outlaw air travel, and criminalize milkshakes, all while spending trillions of dollars on a dubious effort to eliminate coal, oil and gas and guarantee jobs.

Senator Charles E. Grassley, Republican of Iowa, called the proposal a “utopian manifesto.” Senator John Thune of South Dakota called it a “socialist fantasy.” Representative Rob Bishop of Utah munched on a hamburger at a news conference where he mused between bites that if the Green New Deal becomes law, “I could no longer eat this type of thing,” since cattle would be eradicated.

Using a price tag calculated by the conservative American Action Forum — \$93 trillion over 10 years — fact sheets circulated among Republicans offer a litany of fanciful ways to use Green New Deal funds, such as filling Lake Michigan with Coca-Cola.

Democrats have accused Mr. McConnell of trying to sabotage any action on climate change and pushed Republicans to come up with a plan of their own for tackling it.

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, who introduced the House version of the Green New Deal, blasted Republicans on Twitter for holding a “bluff vote” and called it a “disgrace.”

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Earlier this month, a handful of Democratic senators — including Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, the Democratic leader — interrupted speeches attacking the Green New Deal with questions about their Republican colleagues' belief in climate change.

"Do you believe climate change is real?" Mr. Schumer repeatedly asked.

Democrats acknowledge that Republicans have been aided by the Green New Deal's effort to link the reduction of planet-warming pollution to controversial economic goals like employment guarantees and single-payer health care. And the resolution's botched rollout — when a staff member issued and then quickly retracted a fact sheet that joked about how long it will take to "fully get rid of farting cows and airplanes" — also gave opponents ready-made talking points.

But many question the political impact of a stunt vote. Daniel Lashof, who directs the United States operations of the World Resources Institute, a global environmental think tank, accused Republicans of a "bad-faith effort to label whatever the Democrats do as socialism." He predicted it wouldn't resonate beyond those already antagonistic to climate change.

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, Democrat of Rhode Island, an outspoken advocate for addressing climate change, dismissed Republican attacks on the Green New Deal as "a lot of made up calumnies."

Several Democrats said the caucus still is not unified on how to approach the vote on the Green New Deal, though most are expected to vote "present."

But Republicans say they are on to something.

"At a political level, it's clearly dividing the Democrats," said J. Scott Jennings, a former campaign adviser to Mr. McConnell. "There are clearly Democrats who understand what a disaster this was to be rolled out the way it was, but they feel trapped by the base of their party that is demanding this sort of extremely out-of-the-mainstream stuff."

But climate change is not "extremely out of the mainstream." Concern about climate change in the United States is the highest it has ever been. On the heels of a deadly wildfire season supercharged by climate change and a report by 13 federal agencies finding global warming poses a serious threat to the economy, Americans are more convinced than ever that emissions from tailpipes and smokestacks are having an impact on the planet.

In many ways the Green New Deal, with its call to power the country entirely on wind, solar and other zero-carbon energy and ensuring the United States eliminates as much carbon pollution as it creates by about 2030, has injected a new enthusiasm for tackling the problem: Every Democratic presidential candidate has been pressed on his or her support of the plan, and it has helped propel climate change into a top-tier issue for 2020.

But it also has created awkward moments for moderate Democrats. Senator Dianne Feinstein of California, for example, was excoriated and mocked on "Saturday Night Live" after she told a group of visiting school children that she opposed the Green New Deal because it wasn't practical and "there's no way to pay for it." Ms. Feinstein has a 90 percent lifetime rating from the League of Conservation Voters, which rates lawmakers on their environmental votes and policies, and has sponsored major climate change legislation for more than 20 years.

Joseph Pinion, a Republican political consultant who advocates a carbon tax, criticized Green New Deal supporters for making it a purity test of support for to address climate change. He called the resolution "possibly the largest setback in terms of getting Republicans to the table certainly in my lifetime."

By packaging efforts to curb emissions with unrelated issues like promises of a federal job guarantee, vacation pay for all Americans and a single-payer health care system, he said the Green New Deal feeds the belief among conservatives that Democrats are using climate change as a cover to enact a broadly liberal economic agenda.

"The problem with the Green New Deal is that it unifies Republicans," Mr. Pinion said. "From your never-Trumpers to your Trump skeptics to your Trumpportunists, all of these individuals are united in the idea that the policies of a Green New Deal would be disastrous for America."

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But polling on the plan is strong, at least among Democrats. Data commissioned by environmental groups in early primary states found 74 percent of likely primary voters reacted favorably when presented the Green New Deal. A new Iowa poll this week reinforced that, finding 91 percent of Iowa Democrats want a candidate who supports the Green New Deal.

“If anything the Green New Deal has brought energy to an issue that had gone stale,” Mr. Whitehouse said, “and as long as we can stay united and keep making progress, it will work out really well for us.”

PHOTO: Democrats have accused Senator Mitch McConnell of trying to sabotage action on climate change. (PHOTOGRAPH BY SARAH SILBINGER/THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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